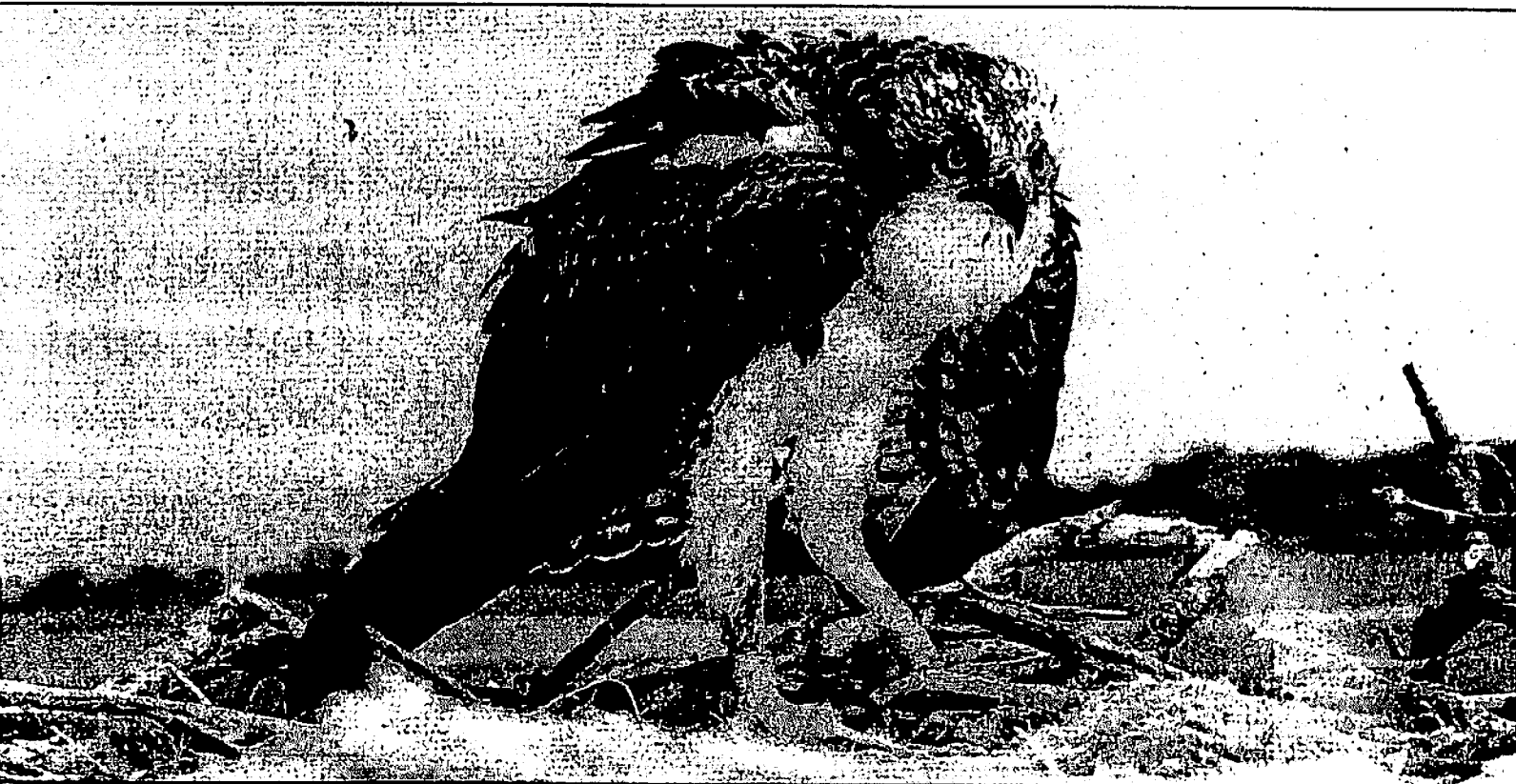


# Once endangered, ospreys are on the rise



PHOTOS / TERRI NICKERSON

A fledgling osprey, about six weeks old, stands atop its nest at Kent Park in Marshfield after being banded for identification.

*In 1964 there were only 11 nesting pairs of ospreys in the entire state. . . . Last year, more than 300 called the state home.*

## Osprey comeback takes off

By Karen Hayes  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

As she has for the past five summers, Terri Nickerson left her own family nest regularly this summer to nurture other nests. But she was rarely welcomed when she arrived to check on the feathered youngsters with sharp talons and beaks perched high atop nesting poles in local marshes.

Still, Nickerson, an accountant who volunteers with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, was delighted this year to see increased numbers of these young ospreys, large fish hawks that once were nearly eradicated by widespread use of the pesticide DDT.

In 1964 there were only 11 nesting pairs of ospreys in the entire state. Although the use of DDT, which caused the birds' eggshells to soften, was banned in the United

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States in 1972, there were only 45 nesting pairs in Massachusetts when the Osprey Recovery Project was instituted by the state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife in 1981.

Thanks to the combined efforts of state and local conservation agents, Audubon, utility companies, and local bird lovers, the osprey has made a major comeback over the years. The bird was removed from the endangered species list in 1990. And last year, more than 300 nesting pairs called Massachusetts home.

"These are the good old days," said Bill Davis, wildlife biologist and coordinator of the Osprey Recovery Project. "There have never been more ospreys nesting in Massachusetts than we have right now."

Local efforts have paid off, too. The birds have never been as prolific along the South Shore as in Martha's Vineyard and around the Westport River, Davis said, where large recovery projects have resulted in dense populations. Still, he said, ospreys have shown signs of recovery along South Shore waterways.

This year, for example, there were two nesting pairs in Duxbury, two in Hull, six in the Lakeville-Middleborough area, three in Marshfield, one in Scituate, two in Plymouth, two in Carver, and two in Weymouth, Davis said.

Davis has helped erect more than 100 osprey nesting poles in southeastern Massachusetts since the recovery project began 16 years ago. Back then, he said, there were no ospreys anywhere on the South Shore.

Since the osprey was removed from the endangered species list, the state has had to rely more heavily on volunteers for data on the birds. Nickerson, Helen Cross, an Audubon volunteer from Hull; Joe Grady, a Duxbury conservation administrator; Norman Smith, director of Audubon's Blue Hills Trailside Museum; and others look after about 16 active and inactive nesting poles erected near waterways to attract the birds in Duxbury, Scituate, Marshfield, Weymouth, and Hull.

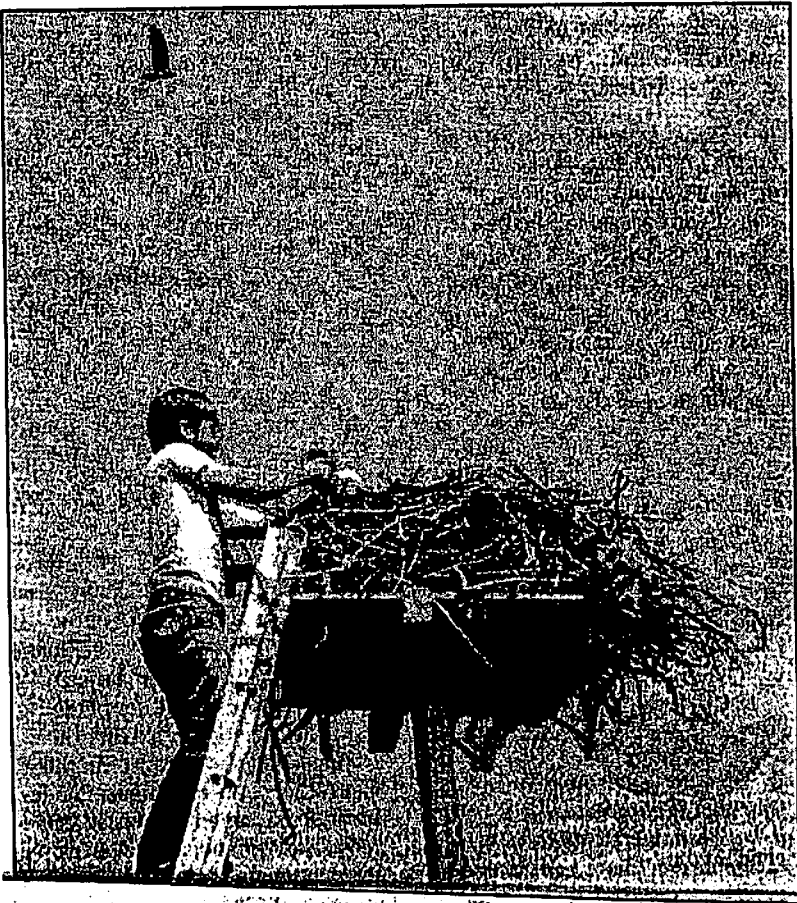
"We had 16 hatchlings this year,"

**'The birds belong in this environment. We were the ones largely responsible for their demise in the pesticide era. Now we are responsible for their comeback.'**

BILL DAVIS, wildlife biologist and coordinator of the Osprey Recovery Project

Nickerson said. "Last year we had eight. There was a big boom this year. We don't know why."

This summer six hatchlings came from two nesting poles in Duxbury, two from a Scituate nest, two from a Marshfield nest, two from a Weymouth nest, and four from a Hull nest, Grady said.



A parent bird flies overhead as Norman Smith, director of the Blue Hills Trallside Museum, grabs a fledgling for banding.

Over the past five years, Smith has banded about 40 local birds with federal Wildlife Service bands in July, when they are about five or six weeks old. An encouraging sign, he said, are increases in new nests. The Scituate nest was new this year, the one in Hull was new last year, and one new site in Weymouth shows signs of occupation for next year, he said. Smith and others hope anyone who knows of an osprey nest in the area will report it to Audubon so that it may be monitored.

"There seems to be a trend toward having more young in the nest," said Nickerson, noting another sign of progress. "Over the past few years, we have had two nests with four young, which is really unusual, and several with three."

Nests can produce between one and four chicks, but the average is two. The numbers of chicks who make it to adulthood is anybody's guess, Grady said. Metal sleeves are placed on nesting poles to deter raccoons. But little can be done to stop great horned owls from swooping down on nests and picking off chicks. Sometimes chicks strangle in fishing line tangled among nesting material.

"The survival rate is maybe 10 percent," Grady said. "It's just a tough life out there. They are shot at, they starve to death, there is disease, they get hit by airplanes."

Utility companies have joined conservation efforts because the



Smith places a band on osprey's leg at Great Esker Park, Weymouth. Ospreys plunge feet-first into water to grasp prey with their talons.

birds often build large, bulky, stick-filled nests atop utility poles, where nest material sometimes falls onto power lines, ignites, and starts grass fires below. Last year was the first time a pair nested at a Hull nesting pole erected by Hull Electric after birds started brush fires at another site there.

This year birds also built a nest atop a crane at the former General Dynamics Shipyard, but environmentalists were unable to get at it, Smith said.

The state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife is now working with Commonwealth Electric on a brochure that will outline the natural history of the osprey and provide instructions on how to erect a nesting pole on your property.

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Ospreys return to the South Shore area to lay eggs in April of each year, with the chicks hatching in June, said David Clapp, director of Massachusetts Audubon South Shore Regional Office in Marshfield. Couples mate for life and return to the same nest each year. Chicks, who stay in the nest for seven or eight weeks, are virtually full grown by the time they are ready to fly. Adult birds migrate as far south as South America in August, and chicks follow in September, after they get

hunting skills and put on more weight.

Ospreys grow to about two feet in length, with a five- to six-foot wingspan. They live along rivers and seacoasts, where they hover, plunge feet-first into water, and grasp fish with their talons. The bottom of their feet have sharp, spiny projections that give the bird a firm grip on its slippery prey.

"Now we are trying to organize all osprey data by town," Davis said. "It has gone beyond our means to accurately keep up with it, they have done so well."

Clapp speculated osprey numbers could be higher locally if not for increased competition for food from the double-crested cormorant, a common shore bird. But Davis is skeptical.

"A lot of people are pointing an accusing finger at the cormorant," he said. "But both the cormorant and osprey populations are increasing at the same time."

Davis credits a network of nearly 120 osprey observers in southeastern Massachusetts for contributing information to the state.

"The birds belong in this environment," Davis said. "We were the ones largely responsible for their demise in the pesticide era. Now we are responsible for their comeback."